STRESSFUL ENCÖUNTERS

RUN THEATER ÖF THE MÏND

Grid-based tactical combat is time-consuming to adjudicate. If you need to use an area map, keep the pace quick by ditching the grid and using a system like 13th Age's fictional positioning.

IMPÖSE A TÏME LÏMÏT

Force the players into fast-paced action by presenting them with an individual time limit for each of their turns, an overall encounter time limit, or both. Timers should always be visible—both digital countdown clocks and sand timers are readily available online.

MAKE QUÏCK RULÏNGS ÏN THE PLAYERS' FAVÖR

Never stop the action to look up a rule. In fact, don't even bring the rulebook to the table. If something comes up during the game where the correct rule is unclear, make the ruling that most benefits the players and move on.

STAND AND RAÏSE YÖUR VÖÏCE, ÏF ABLE

Your delivery is crucial to making the players feel stressed—the urgency in your voice keeps the tension high. If you're able, stand and raise your voice when describing the action. Move around the table and get in the players' faces. Make gestures and sound effects. Don't use a GM screen.

PLAY TENSE MUSÏC

Nothing saps tension worse than a silent game room. YouTube is a great resource for battle music in any genre ranging from epic orchestral to pulse-pounding metal. Avoid tracks with vocals since they can be distracting.

SET THE ENCÖUNTER ÏN TERRÏFYÏNG ARENAS

A stressful encounter needs a stressful backdrop. Heighten the players' anxiety by placing your encounters in mythic, fantastic arenas fraught with threatening terrain. The players should feel that the dungeon wants to kill them as badly as the monsters do, and that there is no such thing as a safe place to hide.

SHÖW AN ÏMPENDÏNG DÖÖM

Frame your encounters around an exigency that forces the players into the fray. A ritual nearing completion, an artifact facing imminent destruction, an environment growing more lethal by the moment—these situations and others demand action. Remind players of the impending doom should any choose to hide near the entrance.

START EACH PLAYER'S TURN WÏTH A THREAT

Start each player's turn by warning them about the most pressing threat they face right at that very moment. If there's nothing threatening the hero, turn the environment into a threat. Standing still or choosing not to act should always have consequences.

ALWAYS NAME THE STAKES

Make it clear to the players each time they make a roll that they're taking a risk in exchange for a potential reward. Lay out what the players stand to lose should they roll poorly and the ways in which that failure, if bad enough, might turn the whole encounter against them.

END EACH RÖUND BY ÏNTRÖDUCÏNG A NEW DANGER ÖR WÖRSENÏNG AN EXÏSTÏNG ÖNE

Repeating the same actions every round is the essence of a boring encounter. Always introduce some new danger or worsen an existing danger in a way that forces the players to stay on their toes and reassess their tactics.

WARN THE PLAYERS WHEN A LÏMÏTED RESÖURCE ÏS RUNNÏNG LÖW

Heighten the players' stress by reminding them when their limited resources are running low, including life, uses of a power, charges in a magic item, or time remaining to complete the encounter. Linger on nearly-depleted resources when a player puts them at risk to really emphasize the stakes.